STRANGER IN A FAMILIAR LAND: Finding the Unexpected in the Midst of Fieldwork

by María Belén Noroña Salcedo

I TRAVELED BACK HOME TO ECUADOR IN MAY 2007 to spend two months doing fieldwork with an indigenous community in the central Andean province of Cotopaxi. I wanted to better understand the way in which a group of families living at the rim of the volcanic crater of Lake Quilotoa were providing tourist services to the lake's visitors in order to complement their local economies.

Those two months were probably the most fulfilling and enjoyable, but also the most difficult, that I have experienced as a graduate student. I will share here some of the unexpected situations from which I learned that flexibility and empathy might be just as important as the research plan when entering an unfamiliar social setting, especially an indigenous one.

In Ecuador, the diversity of regions and cultures becomes apparent even among Ecuadorians when someone penetrates a community whose history, geography, and livelihood contrast so sharply to his or her own. Therefore, it was not so much Quilotoa's adverse environmental conditions, such as the bitter cold found at 12,500 feet, that concerned me; rather, questions related to the politics of research raced through my mind from the moment I first contemplated living in the community for two months: How would I introduce myself into the community, how would I overcome language barriers, how much information should I give the community about myself and the work I wanted to accomplish, and how would I deal with a possible negative response from the community?

I first gained access to the community through some indigenous friends in a nearby village who then introduced me to a family in Quilotoa. Once in the community I met some of the community leaders, and very shortly thereafter I became aware of the most critical concerns leaders and families had with regard to my presence. They wanted to know why I was interested in writing about Quilotoa and who would benefit from the information produced. After answering all their questions, it became clear that I should adapt to cultural expectations and fulfill the tradition of communal reciprocity. Thus, the community and I agreed that I would have access to information in exchange for volunteer work in the communitarian hostels, as long as I promised to bring the study back to the community so they could use it for their own benefit.

Some may assume that my status as an Ecuadorian national would benefit my research, but interestingly, being an Ecuadorian mestiza seemed to create more discomfort and suspicion among the indigenous people than foreigners did. With time I understood that people in Quilotoa see foreigners as good clients and an opportunity to build international tourist networks, thus increasing social prestige. On the other hand, Ecuadorian mestizos like me reminded them about their history of oppression, not to mention the constant struggle to maintain land and natural resources in indigenous hands.

Moreover, despite being a woman, I experienced great difficulty in gaining the indigenous women's trust. "A married woman like you should have at least two children by now. Are you sick?" asked one woman. Another echoed the first, claiming that marriages in the cities do not last. Their initial opinions about me made it very difficult to communicate, further complicated by a language barrier due to the fact that community women speak mostly Quichua.

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Spending time with women means gaining access to their intimate space, namely, the kitchen. It took me some time, but after they witnessed that I was a quick potato-peeler and interested in learning about traditional cooking, they opened up, talking about their roles as housewives, mothers, farmers, and recently hostel administrators.

As the weeks went by, I wanted to learn about everyday life in different households, so I tried to stay in various hostels, living with several indigenous families. I thought this move would decrease any perception of favoring one family over another. However, by moving around, I created resentment among some households, who understood my actions as disloyal. I compensated by participating in communitarian work projects. Although a unique balancing act, the process afforded one of my most important observations: despite strong kin ties, there exists an intense competition among the different families. In one case, a host family thought I was spying for a previous household, perhaps stealing their business contacts, and they refused to talk to me. It was not until I participated in the organization of their hostel's welcome party for a group of tourists that they started to see me as a friend.

Collecting information from outsiders in the community was even more complicated. For example, interviewing mestizo entrepreneurs who own hostels near Quilotoa required an understanding of the historical indigenous struggle for land and resources. The community considered the mestizos as land invaders and unfair competition. Memories of forced labor on the hacienda are still fresh among indigenous people; since this only recently ended in the 1960s after centuries of oppression, they fear losing the little they have gained. After community members saw me conversing with someone considered a menace to the community, I was required to answer a series of questions. I patiently answered all of them, making sure they understood that my work required me to gather information from every influence on the community, and assuring them that I did not favor any party.

After two months, I had enough empirical information to return to Austin. I look back on the research experience with the realization that, despite the fact that the initial research questions, timetable, and methods were useful as points of reference and aided in jumpstarting the research, many of them had to be reformulated, rescheduled, and continuously readjusted according to the reality I encountered. Such flexibility and empathy guided the Quilotoa research, making evident the correlations between new tourism ventures and the shared indigenous memories of oppression and struggle, which mirrors the reality I found among the many families and community members who shared their stories with me and, if I may say so, also their hearts.

María Belén Noroña Salcedo graduated from the University of Texas at Austin with an M.A. in Latin American Studies in spring 2007. Her fieldwork in Ecuador was funded by a Summer Field Research Tinker Travel Grant.



COURTESY OF GREGORY KNAPP

Left to right: 1) Indigenous family farming inside the crater of the volcanic lake, 2) Women selling artisan work at the rim of the crater, 3) Volcanic Lake Quilotoa